

Not All Opposites Are Equivalent

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The poetry of Hallel is powered by contrast and change. It is a repeating narrative of reversal. From narrowness to breadth. From slavery to freedom. From abject desperation to the deepest of joys. Hallel moves us from sea to dry land, plummets us into valleys, and brings us up to the summit of the hills. Yet nowhere in the six psalms that comprise Hallel are we taken from darkness to light or from night to day. “Night and day” seems like a very, if not the most, obvious choice of metaphor to include in a set of psalms about contrast and emergence. It seems to fit so well with the hopeful and dynamic aesthetic of these psalms that its absence feels intentional.

I’d like to suggest that night and day are absent because they are, in fact, a set of contrasts that *do not* fit in with the other images that Hallel constructs. Night and day are different because night and day are not just opposites of one another, they are sequential to one another. Time is just the cumulative experience of night and day, day and night. Sunrise, sunset. It is true, of course, that night is the opposite of day, but each night is also the following day’s prequel. Psalm 30:6 employs the image of nighttime in precisely this way. Though you go to sleep crying at night, בָּעֶרְבַּי לֵילִי בָכִי, you rise up singing, וַלְבָבְךָ רָנָה. The poetic pairs of the Hallel, on the other hand, are static in their opposition to one another. Mountains and valleys tend to remain mountains and valleys. It is not the case that in the course of your life that you will see the mountains flatten or the sea become dry land. We don’t see the narrow places widen themselves and the discarded rubble become the cornerstone. Some things, apparently, don’t change.

When life is difficult we often find encouragement in acknowledging that the pain that we are experiencing now—though tough—is temporary, that the difficulty will pass. We console ourselves with the promise that there are more opportunities to come, that night is always darkest before the dawn. This is the kind of pain that night represents. At night we experience a sense of complete loss and total helplessness, but we know, ultimately, that this experience is temporary. The morning is coming and the sun is about to rise. Nighttime represents a wound that is healing.

But it is not always true that there are more opportunities to come, there are some sadnesses that are structural, that are permanent. The dark times that Hallel describes are of this sort. When the Psalmist says that he is enveloped by the bonds of death he is not referring to a passing unpleasantness. When the Psalmist screams out for God to save him, it is not a request for God to speed up a redemption that is inevitable, but rather it is a demand that God intercede and stop what would naturally occur. When the Psalmist thanks God for redeeming his soul he means that without God's intervention his soul would have been permanently, irrevocably lost. In the normal course of events slaves do remain slaves and kings remain kings, privilege and poverty get passed down from parents to children. When Israel left Egypt that was miraculous, an impossible transformation. Hallel invites us to encounter these more radical and unforeseeable reversals.

What Hallel is, then, is a testimony to the unexplained reality that sometimes and somehow even these permanent sorrows come to an end. Sometimes the barren women *do* have children. Not always, not usually, but sometimes. No, you can't expect it, but you can pray for it. You can't explain it, but you can sing about it. What is so incredibly joyful about Hallel is that it is where the impossible occurs, not just once, but again and again. Hallel just isn't about night and day; it's not the poetry of patience, of slow and painful growth. No. Hallel is about real change and real victory, death into life and endings that turn into beginnings. Hallel isn't about the natural course of events, about just waiting it out; Hallel is about miracles.

Hallel reminds us that the impossible has happened in the past and can happen in the future. It doesn't promise us that the good times are coming as the good times always do, because that's not true, often the good times don't come. But every once in awhile, a reversal arrives that totally changes the plan. Not always, but sometimes. And that possibility, even if it is remote, and even if we haven't seen it ourselves gives us a reason to celebrate, a reason to sing, and a reason to pray.